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ABSTRACT

Back to basics education includes, among other skills, the ability to communicate; this ability can be greatly enhanced by a well-designed forensics program that incorporates argumentation and critical thinking. Forensics education can enchance development of communication competence by enlarging students' repertoire of communication acts for the five functions of controlling, feeling, informing, ritualizing, and imagining; by helping students select criteria for making choices from the repertoire; by assisting students in implementing the communication acts chosen; and by evaluating the effectiveness of the communication employed. These dimensions can serve as a framework for the development of a forensics education program which is central and critical to a curriculum concerned with basic communication competence. Debate tournaments are to be seen as one of many ways students can demonstrate competencies gained in such a program. (DF)

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BACK TO THE BASICS: A CASE FOR TEACHING FORENSICS

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BACK TO THE BASICS: A CASE FOR TEACHING FORENSICS

ABSTRACT:

Educationally oriented forensics programs are directly concerned with the development of communication competence. In order for forensics education to reach its greatest potential and meet the goals of "basic education" advocates, however, we must begin to view tournaments as only one of the many ways students are encouraged to demonstrate the natural extension of cognitive and effective behaviors learned and developed within the academic curriculum. The communication functions framework and approach, described in the paper, provides us with a possible approach to teaching argumentation and critical thinking. Such an approach would allow forensics educators to demonstrate more clearly to colleagues and administrators how our programs can be a significant factor in the achievement of the entire school district's goals and objectives.

BACK TO THE BASICS: A CASE FOR TEACHING FORENSICS

What is the relationship of forensics to basic skills instruction? It is obvious to most of us that instruction in forensics is instruction in the basic communication skills. The American College Testing Program (ACT) sponsored an invitational language arts conference where eight invited specialists were asked to respond to the question, "What's really basic in language arts?" One of the two sub-groups ranked "Speaking/Listening: recitation, public speaking, oral communication, debate, dramatization, note-taking, role playing, group interaction" as the number one major content area in the Ideal High School Language Arts Curriculum. The second group ranked it third behind the "Nature and History of Language and its use in social contexts" and "Writing." All participants, however, ranked instruction in oral communication skills ahead of such content areas as "Usage/Mechanics," "Reading," "Critical Reading," "Media," and "Literature."[1]

It is unlikely that all experts and/or administrators arguing for a reemphasis on basic education would rank instruction in speech/listening first, but it does seem safe to assume that they would consider instruction in communication skills a central element in such a curriculum. Writing and speaking and reading and listening are the modes through which we communicate. The processes of invention, investigation, analysis, reasoning, organization, and critical thinking are common to each of these modes. They are some of the critical skills forensics educators

have been teaching for years. It is our responsibility to demonstrate to our respective school systems that we do have something valuable to offer to the educational process. The "back to basics" movement has the capacity to enhance our forensics programs and provides us with immediate avenues into the heart of our academic curriculums. It also, obviously, has the capacity to reduce individual programs to little more than local speaker's bureaus. The end result depends, in large part, upon our informed and persuasive interactions with the policy-making factions within our institutions.

Individuals and groups interested in revising school curriculums are likely to ask forensics educators what it is that they do. What does a student gain from forensics? What can students do after spending a year in your forensic program that they couldn't do before, or that they couldn't do by engaging in other less expensive and less time consuming activities? What is it that you teach that we couldn't be teaching in an English class? Or, why should we even be teaching forensics? These are questions that "back to basics" advocates like to ask and questions that administrators, hard pressed to find places to cut their budgets, must ask. They are legitimate questions. They are questions that we should be asking ourselves. We also need to ask ourselves, "If what we do is so important, why do we so often restrict ourselves to a small percentage of the student population and do most of that work after school and on the weekends?"

Part of our problem seems to be that we cannot agree on a definition of "forensics" even though the National Developmental Conference on Forensics has formulated a definition most educators find acceptable: "Forensics is an educational activity primarily concerned with using an argumentative perspective in examining problems and communicating with people."[2] The

focus of this paper, using that definition, is on the educational activity we call debate and the argumentation theory upon which it is based. It also encompasses, however, a variety of other activities in the area of oral communication instruction and performance. That is what forensics ought to be but I'm not sure that the definition describes the present state of forensics education. In analyzing the forensics programs at the college level, David Thomas concluded, "Currently, forensics has evolved to a subsystem dominated by debate tournaments."[3] His conclusion could be accurately applied to many of our secondary programs. We need to view "debate" in a much broder perspective. It is--it must be--more than a series of speeches practiced after school and performed on the weekends in empty classrooms across the nation. Douglas Ehninger was arguing over twenty-five years ago that educators must view forensics as a cocurricular rather than an extracurricular activity. This term "emphasizes the fact that activities outside the classroom are not mere adjuncts to formal class instruction, but are an integral part of the educative process."[4] The only educationally and economically justifiable type of forensic program, under our present circumstances, is one that is truly cocurricular. Debate coaches, regardless of their other obligations, are primarily educators. Thomas warned college forensics directors that their most crucial task was "to identify the aims and goals of their forensic programs, articulate them to the departments, and demonstrate how forensics programs can be significant in the achievement of departmental objectives."[5] Directors of secondary programs must respond in a similar manner. We must identify the educational goals and objectives of our forensics programs, articulate them to our colleagues and our administration, and demonstrate how our programs can be a significant factor in the achievement of the school districts' goals and objectives.

The "Back to Basics" movement, which has certainly become a goal of many school districts, will play a definite role in the future of secondary forensic programs. It is, however, difficult to respond as a forensic community to the arguments of these "back to basics" advocates because virtually every schoolboard in the state defines "basics" and makes decisions regarding their curricula on the basis of their individual and frequently unique situations. While "back to basics" has become a national chant, there is obviously "no widespread agreement about what the'basics' are and how they should be taught."[6] I am certainly not against basic education but I'm not sure I know what it means. I hope it means, among other things, students ought to be able to communicate--read, write, and speak--at a competent level by the time they graduate from high school. It ought to, and each of us should be involved in helping our respective school districts arrive at the same conclusion. Over fifty percent of the American populace, according to a recent Gallup poll, believe the best way to improve public instruction is to "devote more attention to teaching the basic skills."[7] What happens as a result of this public pressure is, in part, up to us.

There are a number of potential responses we could pursue. We might develop behavioral frameworks for the justification of cocurricular speech programs and activities by delineating, in behavioral terms, the objectives of those activities.[8] We could, along those lines, demonstrate that the accomplishment of the objectives we establish for forensic instruction facilitate the acquisition of the broader objectives and goals established by the school district. That is an "after the fact" approach, however, and I believe speech educators ought to be actively involved in the establishment of those school district goals involving communication skills.

The Report of the Speech Communication Association's National Project on Speech Communication Competencies offers a possible framework for the development of those goals.[9] The members of this National Project attempted to "define communication competence and to specify some of the implications of this definition for research and instruction."[10] The results of this project have been presented at national, regional, and state workshops and conventions during the past two years. Two of the more important aspects of this project are the descriptions of the categories of communication acts according to function and the characterization of communication competence. The five categories of communication acts, hereafter referred to as communication functions, are as follows:

1. Controlling. These are communication acts in which the participants' dominant function is to control behavior: for example, commanding, offering, suggesting, permitting, threatening, warning, prohibiting, contracting, refusing, bargaining, rejecting, acknowledging, justifying, persuading, and arguing.
2. Feeling. These are communication acts which express and respond to feelings and attitudes such as exclaiming, expressing a state or an attitude, taunting, commiserating, tale-telling, blaming, disagreeing, and rejecting.
3. Informing. These are communication acts in which the participants' function is to offer or seek information: for example, stating information, questioning, answering, justifying, naming, pointing out an object, demonstrating, explaining, and acknowledging.
4. Ritualizing. These are communication acts which serve primarily to maintain social relationships and to facilitate social interaction, such as greeting, taking leave, participating in verbal games,

reciting, taking turns in conversation, participating in culturally appropriate speech modes, and demonstrating culturally appropriate amenities.

5. Imagining. These are communication acts which cast the participants in imaginary situations and include creative behaviors such as role playing, fantasizing, speculating, dramatizing, theorizing, and storytelling.

Our primary responsibility as forensic educators is to help our students become more competent communicators, regardless of the particular activity in which we are most interested and involved. In order to help them improve their communication competence, we must help them: (1) enlarge their repertoire of communication acts for all five functions; (2) select criteria for making choices from the repertoire; (3) implement the communication act(s) chosen; and (4) evaluate the effectiveness of the communication employed. While communication competence has those four major features, this does not mean that it has four steps in ordered sequence. All aspects of competence are probably operative in any communication interaction. These four features might best be employed by teachers as we try to focus attention on instructional strategies which will allow our students to develop in each aspect of communication competence.

Knowing what to do in a given communication situation, for example, does an individual little good if he/she cannot implement or evaluate that strategy. The Development of Functional Communication Competencies text offers a number of valuable exercises and activities aimed directly at the development of communication competence in all five functions.[12]

I am convinced that forensics education is directly concerned with the development of communication competence. The activities our students

are involved in are directly concerned with the communication functions described earlier. We should be able to use this framework for the development of a language arts curriculum or a forensics program or an individual course. In any situation, the intent of this approach is evident: communication competence is a basic skill that humans need in order to survive in our society. Instruction in forensics is, or should be, primarily concerned with the development of that competence. This has an obvious implication which I mentioned previously--forensics education is not merely an extra-curricular game. It must be grounded in academic theory and practice. It must be recognized as an educational activity which is central and critical for any curriculum concerned with basic communication competence.

I am not opposed to debate tournaments nor am I opposed to highly competitive forensics programs. In order for forensics education to reach its greatest potential, however, tournaments must be viewed as one of many ways students are allowed to demonstrate the natural extension of cognitive and affective behaviors learned and developed within the academic curriculum. Let me put it another way: if forensics education is an educationally justifiable activity it belongs within the academic curriculum.

Most educators would agree that forensics education provides a potentially valuable educational experience for our students. Most would also agree that we should be constantly striving to improve our programs and our profession. By teaching argumentation and critical thinking in the academic curriculum we can attempt to help solve some of the problems that have given rise to the "back to basics" movement. A cocurricular forensics education program would allow us to reach more students and a wider diversity of students. We could provide those students with a richer variety of activities through which they could demonstrate their competence in using an argumentative

perspective in examining problems and communicating with people. "From this perspective, forensics activities, including debate and individual events, are laboratories for helping students to understand and communicate various forms of argument more effectively in a variety of contexts with a variety of audiences."[13]

What does a program look like? I'm not sure. I do know that there is no "perfect" program for us to copy. We must identify the educational goals and objectives of our own programs. Every school system is different, each of us has different capabilities and interests, and we all work with different students, colleagues, and administrators. Within these situations, however, we must be able to articulate those goals and objectives to a number of interested audiences. And, finally, we must demonstrate how our programs can be a significant factor in the achievement of the entire school district's goals and objectives. Help in achieving these goals is available. The report of the National Developmental Conference on Forensics (Forensics As Communication),[14] Developing Communication Competence In Children,[15] Functional Communication Competencies,[16] curriculum guides from school systems with successful programs, and interested colleagues are invaluable resources. Colleges and universities can also supply information and resources.

Some programs will continue to remain successful regardless of the external pressures, and some will probably fail even with the best leadership. Most programs, however, need to be much better prepared to respond to the inevitable results of the issues raised in this paper. We can respond most effectively if we view forensics education as it has been described in this paper, if we begin to develop educationally justifiable cocurricular programs, and if we work together as a professional forensics community. We must be committed to the development of new forensics programs and the continued growth of established programs. We have too much to offer our students to take any other position.

END NOTES

[1]Renee M. Huntley, What's Really Basic In The Language Arts? (Iowa City: American College Testing Program, 1977), 4-5. Copies of this report are available from ACT in Iowa City for $1.00.

[2]James H. McBath, Ed., Forensics as Communication (Skokie, Ill: National Textbook Co., 1975), 11.

[3]David A. Thomas, "Forensics Shock: Making Forensics Relevant to Tomorrow's Higher Education," Speech Teacher, 23 (September 1974), 238.

[4]Douglas Ehninger, "Six Earmarks of a Sound Forensics Program," Speech Teacher, 1 (November 1952), 237.

[5]David A. Thomas, 239.

[6]Robert F. Hogan and Stephen Judy, "The 'Back to Basics' Controversy," Media and Methods (September 1976), 18. Hogan is the Executive Secretary of the National Council of Teachers of English and Judy is Editor of The English Journal.

[7]James L. Jarrett, "I'm For Basics, But Let Me Define Them," Phi Delta Kappan (December 1977), 235.

[8]Douglas M. Trank, "A Behavioral Framework For the Justification of Cocurricular Speech Programs and Activities," Iowa Journal of Communication 7 (Spring 1975), 13-21.

[9]R. R. Allen and Kenneth L. Brown, Eds., Developing Communication Competence in Children (Skokie, Ill: National Textbook Co., 1976).

[10]Allen and Brown, 245.

[11]Barbara Sundene Wood, Ed. Development of Functional Communication Competencies: Grades 7-12 (Urbana, Ill: ERIC/SCA, 1977), 3-4.

[12]Wood.

[13]James H. McBath, 11.

[14]James H. McBath.

[15]Allen and Brown.

[16]Wood.